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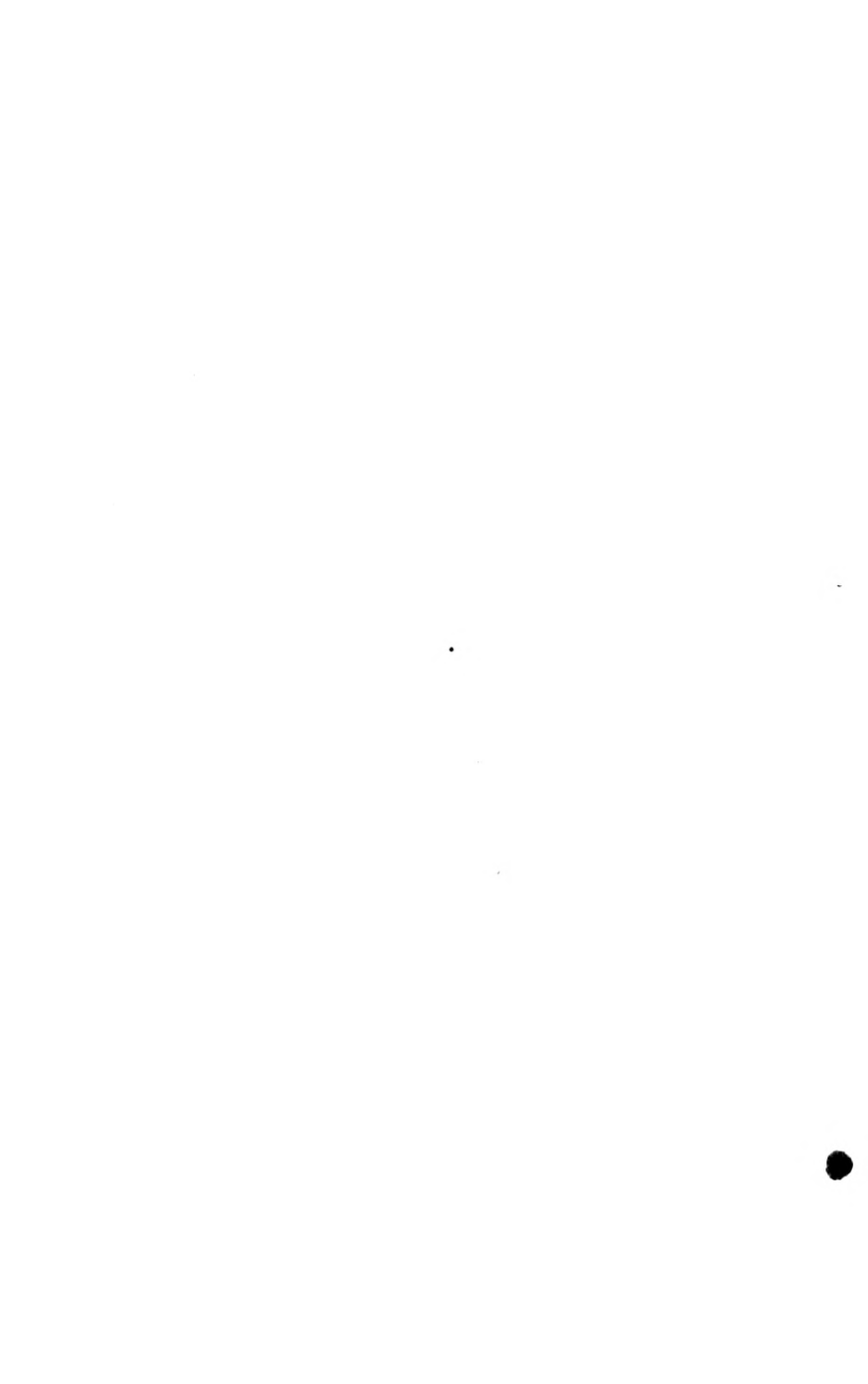
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MONSIEUR SEGOTIN'S STORY

BY
WILLIAM CAINE

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MONSIEUR SEGOTIN'S STORY

IN the days before the war I used to go every summer to Blankenberghe. So did Monsieur Segotin. I smoke ; he sold cigarettes ; and thus it came about that we got to know one another.

M. Segotin's tobacco shop was a small but a very good one. It had an admirable position on the *digue* close to the Casino and the biggest hotels, and it did a thriving trade in choice cigars among the rich men who were always in that part of the town. I was a humble enough customer, but I was an Englishman, and I had a fair command of French, and so M. Segotin honoured me with his approval. In those days Blankenberghe was a Paradise of the holiday-making German, and there was always some genial manufacturer from the Rhine Province or some jolly Westphalian coalowner or some hearty Berlin stockbroker choosing his fat Corona across the counter of M. Segotin, but to none of them was M. Segotin more than distantly polite. "The money of those people," he said to me, one time, "is genuine enough. As for their

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amiabilities, well, that is what I can be doing very well without."

Upon his shop, though it drove a brisk and profitable trade, M. Segotin was in no way dependent. He had retired from active pursuit of the tobacco business ten years before we met, and he lived for the greater part of each year on a little property which he had inherited (together with a moderate income) in his native town of Saint Hilaire, in Central Belgium.

But at the beginning of each bathing season he flitted always, for the benefit of his health, to the coast and opened his shop on the *digue* at Blankenberghe. "For," as he used to say, "at home, on my property, I can be idle because there is always so much to do ; but an idleness of four months by the sea would be my ruin. I should drink beer from morning till night in sheer despair, and I should die very quickly. My establishment, do you see, is a steadying influence for me. It also pays my expenses and a trifle over. So my sea-baths cost me nothing and I remain alive."

He was a bachelor with no near relatives except a sister who lived, married, in England, and two sprightly, middle-aged^o nieces, daughters of a brother, who helped him in his shop, and to whom his possessions were to descend on his death. "The little ones," as Monsieur Segotin always called them, had an easy enough time of it and spent more of their hours on the *digue* or in the sea than behind the counter. Each day M. Segotin bathed at

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nine o'clock. He took an hour between half-past eleven and half-past twelve for a stroll, and his pre-luncheon appetiser in front of one café, and another hour between six and seven for another stroll and his pre-dinner appetiser in front of another café. The rest of the day he passed in his shop, seated with his elbows on the counter smoking his pipe and contemplating through his open doorway the sea and the motley crowd which moved for ever between him and it. At such times "the little ones" were at liberty to do precisely what they pleased, with one exception. There were to be no dealings with the Germans. In the shop, you understand, and strictly in the way of business, it might be allowed; but once outside, "those people" were not supposed to exist for the Mesdemoiselles Segotin.

"You do not like the Germans?" I said to him shortly after we had become acquainted; he had been explaining the rule of conduct which had been laid down for his nieces.

"Well," he replied slowly, "they may be very nice people in their own country. Of that I have no knowledge. But the trouble with them is that they will not stay there. Any country should be good enough for those people, but they evidently don't think that their own is. And they pervade, Monsieur, they pervade. Everywhere they go; everywhere they settle. England is full of them. Both the Americas are full of them. China is full of them. Belgium is full of them. You cannot take a step on

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God's earth without butting your head against one or more of them. I would prefer my world to be a little less full of that race. For, mark me, my good Monsieur"—and he laid a finger along his nose—"though those who come here to Blankenberghe in the summer go back whence they came, one day, one day, they will not go back unless they are driven. And it will be the same everywhere else. One day—pray God it may not be in my time—we shall all wake up to find them in command of the entire situation—everywhere. And then what will remain for us to do, unless it be to hang ourselves upon the nearest tree, supposing always they do not save us that trouble by doing it for us? No, Monsieur, do not ask a Belgian who loves his country whether he likes those people. Belgium is too near a neighbour of theirs for her to view them with anything but concern. Let England hope for Germany's friendship if she will—and she is mad, I tell you, to do so—but do not ask Belgium to look for anything good from that quarter. I tell you that those people have made up their minds to be the inheritors of the earth—and not by meekness. Examine them from here, through my door. Do they not already comport themselves like conquerors? See how they strut and with what complacency they roll their eyes over these fine sands of ours. There are few beaches like this in their country. To-day they bring their children here long journeys in the train to play on our sands among our children. But one day, unless we are all more careful than we

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are, there will be none of our children in summer on these sands. Only theirs. Ours will be working as slaves in their great factories. And yours, Monsieur? And yours? What will be the lot of yours, when Blankenberghe is in Germany? Well, let us hope it may not be in our time."

I need hardly say how much the old gentleman amused me with his blood-curdling suggestions, nor how ready I was with arguments to prove that he was utterly mistaken. In those days nothing was easier than to blow the German danger away down the wind. But this is beside the question at present, when we know what we know; and I can serve no useful purpose by insisting further upon my own folly.

Ever since the war began I had naturally been wondering what had come of it to my poor old friend M. Segotin. That he was ruined like every other Belgian I felt no doubt at all; that he was dead I very much feared—unless it be that I hoped it. For to a man with the passionate love of his own country which was his, death would, I felt, be very desirable in these latter days. That he had not come to England in the great migration I was pretty certain. He knew my address, and would surely have communicated with me had he come over the North Sea. Of course I had no means of finding out anything about him. His little home town of Saint Hilaire had been swallowed up within a few days by the tide of invasion. I had not been in Belgium in the summer of 1914. I supposed, though, that he would have been at Blankenberghe

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as usual when the war broke out. But that town too had quickly fallen into German hands, and no inquiries could be made there. As for his sister who lived in England I never thought of her. I had forgotten that she existed. And so I resigned myself to ignorance of M. Segotin's fate, until better times should make it possible for me to attempt to get some information about it.

Conceive, then, my pleasure when the other day (to be precise, upon the 3rd of May, 1917, at a few minutes before seven—such joyful dates should be well remembered) I ran into the old gentleman in Shaftesbury Avenue. I uttered so loud a shout of surprise and gladness that every passer-by within a hundred yards turned to see what was happening. Little cared I for their curiosity. With one hand already I was pump-handling M. Segotin's arm and patting him on the back with the other. Next moment I had run him into the Monico, plumped him down on a divan, and ordered a dinner of the best. Then only I had leisure properly to examine my capture.

Except that his hair, which used to be grey, was now all white, and that his face was thinner and had more lines in it than formerly, he was in no way changed. Four years, however, had elapsed since we had met, and so much time might well account for these signs of advancing age. It was only when I looked into his eyes that I saw what he had been through; but that which I saw not eternity itself would be long enough alone to set there.

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I sought in talk escape from the message of those eyes.

"And so," I said, "here you are safe and sound. When did you arrive and where are you staying?"

"I arrived," said M. Segotin, "nearly seven weeks ago, and I am staying with my sister."

"Your sister," I cried, "but of course. Where else? I wish I had known how to find that sister. She would have relieved my mind about you, perhaps."

"I think not," said he. "You see, for some little time past I have been dead and buried and in hell, and she and the little ones have known no more of my whereabouts than yourself. For the little ones are with her too."

"That, too," said I, "is good news. I wish I had known. I owe those two young ladies some kind memories which I would be glad to do something to repay. Well, it seems that it is not too late. Soon we must all dine together to celebrate this fortunate reunion. But when did they come to England?"

"At the very first of it," he said. "Indeed, earlier than that. I saw very clearly how things were going, and I dispatched them in the end of July. They were loath to go, but I was firm. My pretext was the slackness of business. Blankenberghe was emptying fast. Those people knew what was coming, and the homing instinct was strong upon them. It was this which would have convinced me had I needed to be convinced. But ever since that business at Sarajevo I had known in

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my bones that we were in for it. Of course to the little ones I made light of the threat of war. They would not have gone else. Women do not see things always clearly. It was a good opportunity, I told them, for the visit so long promised to their aunt in England. I could do without them easily. This silly talk of war had driven people from Blankenberghe. I took in a young fellow of the town to help and I sent them off, promising to come and fetch them home in a few weeks. But what does it matter how I managed it. I managed it. And when their steamboat had got out to sea—well, then I was able at last to breathe a little freely. It was like a weight off my chest. I wrote a letter to my sister telling her to keep them with her until further notice, and then I posted it and then I took the tram back to Blankenberghe. *That* was done. It only remained to see what should happen."

"And you?" I asked. "You did not think it well to go to England also?"

"I?" he said. "Oh, I am an old man. I have lived most of my life. And if war was coming into Belgium it was not the time for Belgians to be going away. There would be plenty to do for anybody who should have a head on his shoulders. And at the worst of it they could only kill me. But, my good Monsieur, any country where those people should come in war was a place for women to be out of. They were bad in 1870 in France; but now they had forty more years of their philosophy behind them, and what happened in France in 1870

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was, I perceived, to be child's play to what was going now to happen in Belgium. Yes, I was decidedly relieved when my two little ones were carried out beyond the harbour mouth of Ostend."

"You had no confidence in the Belgian Army?" I asked.

"I had every confidence in the Belgian Army that it would do heroic things and prove itself worthy; but look you, my dear Monsieur, miracles of the kind you suggest do not happen. David's pebble laid Goliath low, yes. But you cannot with one lucky shot knock out an army like the army of those people. I knew that the Belgian Army would do what it could. But to the army of those people I knew it was no more than a mouthful. That it should have held them back as it did is sufficiently miraculous. I never expected a quarter so much. You see, I had studied this question, and I knew something, though only a little, of what the Germans had prepared for us. I believed that they would drive through Belgium as the waters of a burst dam drive through a village of straw huts. I believed that they would be in Paris within a week, for I never doubted of the road they would take. Belgium lay all open; the French-Belgian frontier lay all open. It was not in those people to neglect so rare a chance. And if they could smash France they could turn on Russia and smash her too, and then they would not give a pudding's end for the intervention of England. That was how I read the future. It was, for me, the end of the world, and

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the sooner I was done with the world the better. So I went back to the shop and sold a few cigars that afternoon and sat down to wait for that which was to come. But"—and M. Segotin sipped comfortably from his glass—"I was wrong, you see. Three years have gone by and I am still alive, and I am once more hopeful. Those people have done their worst, and the world has not yet come to an end. Indeed it may be that it is only beginning again. There are signs, Monsieur, there are signs of a new birth among the nations. Perhaps, after all, it is grateful that we ought to be to those people. They have wakened us up. We were drifting, with closed eyes, pleasantly along towards a horror besides which even this war would have been a bagatelle. And what we have all to do is to seize upon that piece of knowledge, yes, and act upon it. For the danger is still there, unless those people are definitely shown that the world will have none of their ideas.

"Yet I hear talk in London of the impossibility of crushing the sixty millions of our friends across the North Sea. I hear talk of their being disillusioned by their failure. People tell me that they will never try again. But, my good Monsieur, whether it be impossible or not to crush them, it has got to be done. For they will otherwise assuredly try again. What! are we to allow them to believe that they have been able to hold the entire world by the throat for three years and at the end to make a peace in which they will have a word to say? Do

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you think that that is the way to give them a new heart? 'Next time,' they will say to themselves, 'next time we must do better.' That will be all. And next time, mark me, they will do better much better. Twenty years, thirty years, forty, fifty, a hundred, they will give to it; but when next they strike, well, there will be no miracles going then; no Marne, for example. They will walk over us.

"You say we shall know better. We will know no better. In 1870 the world had its lesson if it had had eyes to read, yes, and a score of such lessons before that. And we shall forget. The new generations will come to believe in the good will of Germany as we did. Germany will see to that. But when her hour again strikes it will be *finis*. The entire earth will be swallowed at a gulp, and we shall have the days of Assyria back again everywhere between the two poles. There will be the Germans and there will be their slaves, and that will be all. And the beautiful earth will yield her treasures and her joys not for mankind as was intended, but for its masters.

"You see, my friend," M. Segotin continued after another slow sip, "I know what I am saying. In England you have still no notion of the reality of the danger which the world, and you with it, have for the moment escaped. But in Belgium we are in a better position to judge. And I—I, Aristide Gustave Segotin, three years slave to those people, I tell you that it is not amusing to live with their yoke upon the shoulders.

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"If you will listen to for me a little half hour——"

"But," I said, "I will listen to you all night, my dear M. Segotin. I am here for that very purpose."

"Then," said he, "you shall have it. I have given it before and I have got it into shape for the telling, and no Englishman or other man who shall be ready to hear it from me shall be disappointed. For these are things, look you, which must be told and told everywhere, lest the easy-going optimistic fools prevail when it shall come to a settlement and those people be given another chance to turn God's good earth for their own profit into a slave market.

"Listen, then," he continued. "As you know, I had not long to wait ; only a little over a fortnight. All that is old history—the ultimatum to Belgium, her refusal of it, and the immediate invasion of her territory. It was time for me to be leaving off my sea baths and my constitutional exercises on the *digue*, and to be getting back to my own place. But first, do you know what I did ?

"With the help of my young assistant I carried out the whole of my stock on to the sands at low water and there I made a neat little pile of it. Over this pile I poured some gallons of paraffin oil and then I put a match to it. One of the first fires that the war lit in Belgium, my friend, but not the last. To my neighbours, who were waiting confidently for the news of victory, it was an act of madness ; to me it was a symbol.

"It was also a satisfaction. Those cigars, those

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cigarettes, that pipe tobacco, the Germans would never smoke. I might have sent all that stuff to our own army, you say, you who have seen that sort of thing organised in England so easily and so well. But in England time was given to you to organise. You have the sea between you and the rest of the world. But I ask you to consider what was the condition of affairs at this moment in Belgium. In the hour of mobilisation a country has other things to think about than organising the benevolence of its civilians. Besides, I too had no time. I wished to be in Saint Hilaire at once, and I could not risk that my choice tobacco should be enjoyed by those people. And so my fire was lit. It was a brilliant spectacle, Monsieur. The children of Blankenberghe enjoyed it vastly. Their parents, however, disapproved. 'What sinful waste,' they said, 'is here! This should all have been given to the poor'; and they looked on with longing eyes as I fed my flames with hundreds and fifties of Upmanns and Laranagas. But not one box did they secure for themselves. My young assistant and I were very vigilant. This done, I made up a little bag of things and set out for Saint Hilaire. It was not easy to get there, for the railways were over-busy carrying soldiers and material of war eastwards; but I arrived in time, as one always does—as one always does, my good Monsieur, if only one can endure.

"I need not worry you with any account of what happened at Saint Hilaire until the Germans came.

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I daresay you can imagine it for yourself. At Saint Hilaire it was the same as at other places, at all other places in Belgium and North-Eastern France. Some of us fled ; some of us remained. Some of us hoped and boasted ; others of us despaired and wept. Some of us became foolish ; others kept their wits. We read what the newspapers gave us, and we drew our conclusions according to our ability and our temperament or our knowledge. Only one thing was clear ; the Germans were coming on. Only one thing was disputable ; whether they would be stopped. Well, they came at last, and there we were, face to face with the fact of their presence, to make of it what we could.

“ Their fame had naturally preceded them. We had had time to learn something of what we were in for and to take our measures accordingly. On one thing we were agreed. They were to be given no excuse for outrage. Let them manufacture excuse if they pleased ; upon them alone the responsibility for evil work should rest. I think we fully understood the folly and madness of resistance. The man who in such circumstances, whatever his provocation—I say whatever his provocation—gives an excuse to the invader to start a general massacre of his neighbours is a bad citizen. No man's private honour, dignity, property or what you will is to be vindicated at the expense of a whole town. We received our guests without enthusiasm—that would perhaps have been too much to expect—but submissively. We were as quiet and discreet as it was possible to

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be. It so happened that the soldiers who took possession of us were not a particularly offensive lot of men. They were brutal and overbearing, of course—were they not Germans in a conquered and helpless town?—but they did not massacre us. They invented no pretext for anything of the sort. They requisitioned our food and drink and tobacco and everything else they happened to require, but they spared our women and children and they did not burn our houses over our heads, and there were no fusillades. Hostages they took, of course—was I not one of them?—but we were only required to report ourselves every day and otherwise we were permitted to go about our affairs—such as were left to us—untroubled.

“I suppose they felt that enough had been done, for the time, to terrorise the country. They were still in the full flood of their victorious advance, and expected to be done with the war in a month or two. So long as Saint Hilaire remained quiet they had nothing to gain by murder and arson and rape. At any rate, whatever the cause of it may be, I have no terrible tales of atrocity to communicate to you concerning the early German occupation of Saint Hilaire.

“But I would not have you suppose that we were happy. No ; one is not happy when these people are in possession of one's town. Happiness demands at least a certain measure of freedom from apprehension ; and apprehension oppressed every one of us from the moment of their arrival. It was like

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living over a mine which at any moment might be touched off and send us all to eternity together. It was worse. For a mine is a merciful business compared with the punishment which the German soldiers can deal out to a town which has offended them or which, for their own purposes, they have decided shall be presumed to have offended them. I have said that they did not treat us with any open violence. Indeed, many of them used towards us a certain barbarous geniality. I really believe that these men imagined that we ought to be very glad that the German Eagle had spread its protecting wing over Belgium. They announced their victories to us with more than an evident expectation that we would share their pleasure and they seemed amazed when we did not break out into hearty cheering. But that is Germany. She is so wholly convinced of her mission to set the rest of the world to rights that she cannot conceive how it should happen that everyone else is not of the same opinion.

“Yet though, for the moment, they were not openly outrageous, we knew that if it should suit their book they would embark upon a course of loot and murder and outrage without the smallest remorse or hesitation. Bullocks might feel as we did, were they endowed with human intelligence, when their farmer walks among them. Until their market is ready they may browse in peace, safe from every injury ; but let the buyer give the word and write his cheque and the poleaxe is their portion.

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“Yes, my dear Monsieur, that was Germany's attitude to the Belgians from the first. You have seen von Emmich's proclamation to the country, the proclamation which the German Army carried with it across the Belgian frontier on the 4th of August. ‘To my very great regret—under the constraint of unavoidable necessity—Germany is compelled to invade Belgium. It is my greatest wish that a conflict between the two nations, once allies, may be avoided. Remember the glorious days of Waterloo. A free passage to attack France is all we desire. I give a formal pledge to the Belgian population that it will have nothing to suffer from the horrors of war. *Et patiti et patita*. But we must have free passage. It is for you to choose.’

“Well, we chose. It is our glory ; but it has been our ruin, though I would not have it otherwise. We chose, and thereupon the glorious days of Waterloo faded into the background to be replaced by the glorious days of Louvain and Liège and Andenne.

“That is ever the German way : first the smiling face or, if that fails, the fist straight between the eyes. After that, anything you please. No, those people do not go in for half measures. You must be their ally or their slave and, if you are their ally, they must still be the masters, absolute and unquestioned.

“And so we were apprehensive and went about with an extreme delicacy. You have heard of Andenne? We heard of it before you did, I expect.

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That business took place on the 20th and 21st of August. On the 22nd I was shown a poster that had been put up that morning all over Liège informing the town that Andenne had been reduced to ashes and that 110 people had been shot because the population, after receiving the Germans peacefully, had treacherously attacked them. This was a sort of delicate hint to Liège to behave itself, you understand. Yet one would have supposed that the Germans might have spared themselves this trouble, seeing that at Liège on that same night of the 20th, twenty-nine civilians had been murdered and fifty-five houses had been burned.

“The proclamation, my friend, is a leading feature of German occupation. If the town in which these people find themselves goes astray in any particular, it is surely not for lack of instruction. From the moment of the soldiers' entry into Saint Hilaire it snowed posters and notices, green, orange, red, blue and white. The walls of Saint Hilaire were the only gay things in the place. Perhaps you would like to know what sort of a regime it was which was thus instituted. Yes? Very good. Now listen, and remember always that in Saint Hilaire we had at first much less of which to complain than in many a hundred other towns. My story is a dull one, I know, void of spectacular incidents and sparing of thrills and sensations; but, believe me, all the horrors are not spectacular, and a simple iron heel ground steadily into one's neck for weeks and months and years can have as deplorable an effect in the end upon

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the physique as a quick shot through the heart or the rather slower business of being crucified and roasted alive. Yes, Monsieur, it is possible to die of too many orange and pink proclamations ; yes, and to go mad first. I have seen it with these eyes.

“ They began, then, like good Germans, by making arrangements for their own comfort. They distributed amongst us a large quantity of forms which they had brought with them—for, mark you, these people think of everything—and which each householder was required to fill up and return to the mayor. This form was a declaration first as to the number of men, women and children in the household, and then as to the quantity of provisions and other commodities and animals in the possession of the declarant, such as groceries of every kind, bottled wine, champagne, common brands, liqueurs and cognac, cigars, tobacco, motor-cars and their engines, bicycles, candles, matches, petrol, horses (both cart and riding) in working order, horses injured by work, horses injured by projectiles, harness, oxen, cows, pigs, sheep, calves, fowls, chickens, eggs, though as far as the last were concerned they made no distinction as to their age or as to their being broken or no. Nor did they ask for ducks or turkeys or geese. Strange omissions, but no doubt they had their own reasons, for making them, since they always have their reasons. They also left out lambs and sucking-pigs, with ducklings, goslings and chicken turkeys. It is a mystery why these things were not scheduled. Perhaps it was a bit of

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preparation in case it should become necessary to make an example of us. Somebody could have been found to have withheld a duck or a gosling, and then they would have had an excuse for a few fusillades. But they made up for their forgetfulness (if it was forgetfulness) by taking everything that they had not mentioned by name, just as if it had been put on the form.

“Then, lest any householder should have been left out, they posted up brilliant green notices which told us that these forms had been distributed, and that they could be obtained at the Mairie, and must be obtained by anyone who had not received one of them. As if any living creature in that paralysed little town could be unaware that the whole of its food supply was being taken from it!

“They had stripped our larders, but your German has a soul that can concern itself with more than victuals and drink, whatever some people may say of him. His desires include money. He is careful to fill his belly, but he thinks also of his pocket. And so our good friends proceeded to levy a contribution of cash upon the town. Nothing very tremendous, you understand. Saint Hilaire is not a Lunéville to be bled to the tune of 650,000 francs or a Brussels to be required to produce millions of your pounds. Thirty thousand francs was all they took from us to begin with; but, my faith, they would have been hard put to it to take more. Their assessment was nicely calculated. It would seem as if they had known to a centime how much

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we would be likely to scrape together, and indeed it is very probable that they did. Like all the world, we too had had our Germans amongst us in the days before the war, good, fat, jolly fellows whom many of us were glad to invite into our homes. Such people have opportunities of making estimates as they go about in a small community where everyone knows all about everyone else. No doubt they reported their discoveries. This contribution was not called a contribution, you understand. It was levied by way of security for our good behaviour, and we were told by proclamation that it would be refunded to the town if the inhabitants showed themselves reasonable and committed no hostile act. But the Germans are apparently still waiting to assure themselves of Saint Hilaire's reasonableness. And, of course, so long as they are there, there is always the possibility that a hostile act may be committed.

“Having thus made arrangements by which we should be prevented from eating ourselves to death, or gambling ourselves into the workhouse, they set about providing for the maintenance of order and tranquillity in the town.

“They plastered our walls with orange papers which forbade us to leave our houses during the daytime except for absolutely necessary purposes, in order, for instance, to buy provisions—and from whom, dear God?—or to water cattle. At night we were absolutely forbidden to leave our houses after six o'clock in any circumstances whatever.

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The cafés were to be closed at five. Anyone who should attempt to leave the town by night or day upon any pretext whatever would be shot. We were not to dig potatoes except with their consent and under military supervision. Their sentinels and patrols were authorised to fire (at their own discretion, please observe) on anyone who should depart from these directions.

“ Well, that at any rate put an end to any junketing in the streets. The Pax Germanica had fallen upon the town, which might have been a dead one. Decency was observed in our streets, I promise you, in so far as their lawful inhabitants were concerned. It was hardly worth while to take the air with one's sweetheart if the consequences were to be a bullet from the first sentry who chose to loose off his rifle by way of distracting the monotony of his existence.

“ But you must not think that the town was not gay at night. On the contrary, we lived in a perpetual illumination. For a new poster had gone up by which we were instructed to keep a light burning in all rooms which looked on to the street. Not only this, but all our front doors were to be left constantly open, so as to afford the military authorities access to the houses. The town wore thus an appearance both hospitable and festive, but can you conceive it, my dear Monsieur? A whole town lit from cellar to garret, every house door standing open and not a soul abroad save a few sinister figures in spiked helmets with rifles on

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their shoulders. Can you imagine the anxious care with which these lights were maintained by the inhabitants? For the extinction of so much as one of them might be the signal for a bullet through a window, behind which it might find a beloved bosom to pierce. And can you figure to yourself the security in which those families slept at night, with their front door open to the first comer and that, maybe, a drunken German? Yes, my friend, it looked festive, but it was otherwise, I do assure you.

“And remember that there was not one of us who did not expect at any moment a general massacre to begin. Though we had been spared that attention so far, we had no reason for anticipating the continuance of such a condition. Why, a door could not slam without our hearts leaping out of our mouths; a child could not begin crying without our believing that the end had come. Nervousness? Well, perhaps it was nervousness, but I doubt if nervousness ever had a better excuse. Our Germans were, for Germans, apparently of a not altogether abominable kind; but it is thus with those people, Monsieur. One never knows. I daresay the poor souls who died in many a score of Belgian and French villages imagined, up to within a few minutes of their death-agony, that ‘their Germans’ were not such bad examples of the breed, after all. There is to me something inconceivable about a people that can crack a joke with you one minute and blow out your brains the next simply because an order has

been given. And, mark, that while the joke is being cracked, the order is being awaited.

"I have told you that I was a hostage. Yes, I had that dubious honour. We were six in number ; the mayor, the curé, the schoolmaster, the postmaster, the principal shopkeeper and your servant in his quality of a landowner. Saint Hilaire is little more than a village, and the community is a simple one. We have few notables amongst us, and our visitors had to put up with what they could find in the way of important persons. It was, as it happened, a formality for us. We had as much liberty as our neighbours ; only we were required to report ourselves each morning at ten o'clock. But, again, one never knew.

"On the Mairie, on the church door, outside the post office and in a score of other places up and down our streets great green papers announced our names in full and in large, for all the world to see. And as we went along between our homes and the place where we were required to present ourselves, at every corner each of us was mildly reminded that, should there be the least disorder, he would be shot. That was the expression—'the least disorder.' And will you tell me, my good Monsieur, what that might precisely mean. It seemed, at any rate to us, the hostages, an expression of rather too much elasticity. You see one had knowledge of some examples of such 'disorder.' Aerschot, Dinant and Louvain had all been given over to the mercies of the German soldiers because of 'disorder' which had

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occurred in those towns. And in what did this 'disorder' consist? At Aerschot a German had fired into the air; at Dinant French soldiers had fired at German soldiers in the ordinary way of war; at Louvain German soldiers had fired on one another. It seemed only wanting that at Saint Hilaire a German soldier should commit suicide, for such 'disorder' to result in the execution of us its hostages and thereafter in the massacre of most of the population. There was another notice for us to read as we went along. This was the proclamation of von der Goltz, the German general, dated from Brussels. I have it by heart, for it is one of their masterpieces, and I read it again and again, always with fresh amazement. This is how it ran:

"In future the inhabitants of places situated near railways and telegraph lines which have been destroyed will be punished without mercy whether they are guilty of this destruction or not. For this purpose hostages have been taken in all places in the vicinity of railways in danger of similar attacks; and at the first attempt to destroy any railway, telegraph or telephone line, they will be shot immediately.'

"Saint Hilaire, my friend, is a small place, but it is not without its railway station, its telegraph and its telephone. But it was not this reflection which was uppermost with me whenever I read that enormity on the walls. You have no doubt seized upon the words which I found of so much significance. Yes. 'Whether they are guilty or not.' There

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speaks the essential German. A telephone or a telegraph wire is cut ; a railway bridge is blown up. So ! it is inconvenient for the German Army, that. Who did it ? Belgian soldiers ? Belgian civilians ? There is no time to consider that. We make war not upon the army but upon the whole country. That is our theory of war. That is the only true theory of war. Is it not ours, *donnerwetter* ? And we have been put to inconvenience. Such acts hinder the march of Kultur. So ! Well, they must be stopped. And since we cannot lay hands on the Belgian soldiers who assuredly did this thing, as it was their duty to do, let us be satisfied with what we can lay our hands upon. Civilians are plenty and easy. Come, then, let us put a few villages to the sword and torch in this neighbourhood. That will perhaps teach the Belgian Army to let our communications alone. Let us shoot a few hostages, say twenty—or perhaps thirty, to be on the safe side. And let us not be afraid to announce our readiness to kill innocent people, if it should so fall out. Better that a thousand innocent Belgians should die than one guilty German. And these cuttings of the wires endanger German lives, by prolonging the operations. Come, then, shoot me this batch of hostages. Blot out this village and this and this, and let us get on with the civilisation of humanity. This is the way *we* do things. Therefore it is right. Innocence ? Guilt ? What do those words mean ? We have done with all that. We attach importance only to such words as ‘ strong ’ and ‘ weak,

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'German' and 'non-German.' Our opponents say that Right is Might. Very good. Then in that case, ha! ha! Might must be Right, and we are mighty, aren't we? But enough of jesting. War is a stern business. Load, aim, fire! And now, *Nach Paris!* once more.

"Yes, my friend, my fellow hostages and I had plenty to think about as we went to give our masters our morning salute. We knew that, any day, on our arrival at the military headquarters we might be informed that some 'disorder,' some gross infringement of the regulations had occurred—some house door had been blown to by the wind or some candle had been forgotten—and that we were to be shot, by way of breakfast. We knew well that to be a hostage with the German Army was for a man to take the chances of a thousand to one against his not being shot, either by his captors in expiation of some so-called offence by his fellow-citizens, or, more tragically still, by his fellow-countrymen, while being driven in front of the Germans as a living screen. The battle front was far from Saint Hilaire, and this second fate was an unlikely one for any of us. But one never knew. The tide of battle might roll back upon us. And then! Well, meanwhile, our immediate anxiety of every morning was enough for us to deal with. I am an old man and I cared little for life in those days, but even so I could have dispensed with that every-morning doubt. As for my colleague, the shopkeeper, he was very fond of his life, and the thing preyed upon his mind to such

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an extent that he ended by cutting his throat. That is amusing, eh? The Germans were amused, at any rate. They made up a little song about it and sang it in the streets. But first they chose another hostage; they were careful to do that, of course.

"As not more than three people were allowed to be together out of doors, the funeral of our friend was a very quiet one, at least as far as we were concerned. The Germans attended it, however, and sang their song. Perhaps their design was to cheer the widow up.

"This prohibition of assemblies had been made by yet another proclamation. No doubt the measure was a wise one. We had all been required (under pain of death) to deliver up such poor weapons as we had; our guests were taking no risks, and who knew if the order had been strictly obeyed? Now suppose a few desperate characters had retained their pistols, and suppose four of them had got together and made an attack. One or two Germans might have received injuries. They were a hundred and fifty in number, and they were all armed to the teeth, and they had some machine-guns with them; and so they felt pretty confident of not being actually worsted; but the blood of a German soldier is, as we know, a fluid that is not to be spilled if precautions can keep it in his veins. At any rate if, during the daytime, two of us, going about our 'absolutely necessary purposes,' happened to meet a third, we all hastened to separate lest a fourth should, by some accident, add himself to our number

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and the machine-guns be set to work to clear the streets of a riotous assemblage.

“ And now, lest we should seek comfort for our earthly miseries by taking a glance heavenwards now and then ; lest we should turn our eyes from the sad spectacle of our poor little hushed town, and the wearers of spiked helmets who swaggered about in it, to solace them with a glimpse of God's beautiful sky and the assurance that the sun was still alight in it ; behold ! another plague of posters to inform us that it would be very imprudent for us, even out of simple curiosity, to follow too attentively the manœuvres of aircraft that might happen to fly over our heads. The most severe penalties were promised us should we attempt to make signals to the aeroplanes of those who were endeavouring to rescue us. It is, of course, always possible that somebody in Saint Hilaire might have waved encouragement to a French or a British aeroplane, had it appeared and had anybody in the town at that time known how to distinguish it from a German one ; but such a natural movement might surely have been punishable by something less than the most severe penalties, death, for example. And it was clear from that poster that any glance skywards, even to see what weather was promised, might be rewarded by a shot from a sentry. Yet the chances against an aeroplane hostile to our masters arriving over Saint Hilaire were, at that time, enormous. However, so it was. Picture us, then, moving about in the prosecution of our ‘ absolutely necessary

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purposes,' singly and with our eyes on the ground, through those silent, sunlit streets, afraid to speak to one another, afraid to raise our heads, our ears strained for the crack of the rifle which should shatter the silence or give the signal for a cataclysm. Ah ! my good friend, if it was not gay in Saint Hilaire by night, it was not by day either.

“ Then our church bells were silenced lest by this means communication with ‘ the enemy ’ (as they called our friends) be opened up. God, Who knows all things, may perhaps understand how the ringing of an Angelus could convey information to an ‘ enemy ’ that was beyond sound of a shot from the biggest howitzer in the German Army, or what information it could carry save that we still believed in Him ; but this mystery was as far beyond our comprehension as ‘ the enemy ’ was beyond sound of our bells. And so we lost yet another source of consolation. For, believe me, my friend, there are conditions of existence in which the voice of a church bell can carry a message that is not without its value to those who hear it, even though that value be not connected with military affairs.

“ It was also forbidden to us to approach, on any pretext, the sick or wounded, even the dead, belonging to the German armies, or the prisoners of war who were under the protection—save the mark !—of the German armies. Not even by an occasional act of kindness to a suffering or a miserable man might we relieve our burdened hearts. To testify by so much as a cigarette, by so much as a cheering word

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or a smile, our gratitude to those who had lost everything but life for us ; to exercise the Christian duty of showing compassion to an enemy ; these things were denied to us. To have given so much as a glass of water to a poor fevered devil, friend or foe, might have been to set our homes ablaze over our heads. It is unnecessary to say that anything that could be construed into concealment of or assistance given to an escaped prisoner was punishable with instant execution. Already, very early in the war, they had gone through Saint Hilaire with a small tooth comb in their search for wounded Belgian and French and English soldiers who might have been concealed. At a given moment a house-to-house visitation had been begun, every street being occupied by German pickets and ten hostages being taken from it. The proclamation which preceded this search had promised death to these hostages should any disorder occur in a street. But no soldiers had been found ; no disturbances had occurred ; no hostages had been shot. It had proved a very tame affair. Yet it was always possible that a prisoner of war might escape and take refuge in Saint Hilaire. It was necessary to remind us of the danger of harbouring such scoundrels. We were encouraged in our obedience from time to time by the exhibition of great posters which announced the shooting of people in other places who had incurred the displeasure of the Germans by actions of this kind. The names of these unfortunates were printed in large black letters, even

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as those of us, the hostages, had been printed. It was impressive, I do assure you. Each man who read such a notice said to himself, 'To-morrow one of the names that people will read up there may be the name of me, A. B., instead of that of this poor C. D., or this E. F.,' or as the case might be. And he turned sick as he read. It was not far from the bitterness of death itself, my friend, not very far.

"Well, well, the reign of terror was established amongst us, as you see, and pretty effectively. Now, having got everything in order and to their liking, our good Germans settled down to the business of making the very most of us. It was a simple business after all. It required no more than the posting from time to time of a new assessment. Belgium had had the effrontery to resist invasion, to reject the divine protection of the Hohenzollerns. By so doing she had constituted herself their prey, had stripped herself of all rights and abandoned every last claim to consideration. She was an orange to be squeezed flat and dry, and those who held her between their hands felt as little pity or remorse as would you or I for a veritable orange that we should have occasion to deprive of its juice for our drinking. Belgium, my friend, is, in this particular, a type of the whole world should those people hold it ever at their mercy between their mailed fists. First they took her food, then her money, then her machinery and her household furniture and everything else that was portable and lootable and then they took her people. But this was not yet. Not then did

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they feel the pressure which a roused world was to exert upon them in their turn, that pressure which was to put them at their wits' end to find hands for the driving of their munition factories. They had still plenty of German labour available, and their armies were still well up to strength. They could themselves still both fight and make shells. And so they contented themselves for the time with stripping their captive. Who shall ever say what quantities of goods of every kind went Eastwards over our railways to be swallowed up and lost for ever beyond the frontier? It was such a loot as has never been seen, and, I pray heaven, will never again be seen on this earth. All the robberies of Rome were a bagatelle to it. For Rome had never a land like Belgium to strip, and Rome never possessed the means of transport which Belgium could provide for her spoilers. Yes, when Germany goes to war, she makes no bones about it. She is thorough, thorough. Nothing is in her sight negligible. Machine bands by the mile, engines and machinery of every sort by the thousands of tons, she took ; and while she took these, she did not scorn to carry off our pianos and carpets, our bicycles, our pots and our pans, our tables and chairs, the pictures off our walls, the bells out of our churches (the bells she had first silenced), the leaden pipes and roofs of our houses, the jewellery of our women (iron money—her own—she gave for this), and the rubber rings that our babies cut their teeth on. Nothing escaped her, if she thought that she could

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find a use for it. Only, it would seem, was she prepared, as someone said in history, 'to leave us our eyes to weep with.'

"But at last, suppose the Germans took alarm at the condition of the people whom they had placed under their 'protection.' Were they to allow them all to starve to death, the opinion of the neutral world, which at that time they still sought a little to conciliate, might be aroused against them. And, no doubt, they had, as I have suggested, a prevision of the future utility of Belgian hands. All things considered, they perceived the advisability of providing us with something to eat from time to time. Their procedure was characteristically economical.

"One day we were privileged to read a proclamation which informed us that it was to our interest to address a petition for food to the Swiss Government. We were bidden to remember the help which Switzerland so generously gave to the town of Strasburg in the war of 1870. We were told that a large part of the provisions of the occupied districts had been carried off by the French and English troops; that now requisitions must continue to be made for the benefit of the German Army. We were assured that the German military authorities recognised no obligation to feed us, and all the less because Great Britain was endeavouring to blockade Germany. Should we succeed in getting food from Switzerland, we were guaranteed that it would be distributed among us exclusively. Those of us who should decline to approach Switzerland would get

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none of the victuals. Finally the German Government offered to act as mediator between ourselves and Switzerland in this delicate affair.

"Such things speak for themselves. It is hard to say where in this war the Germans have touched the height of their impudence, but surely this is a sufficiently remarkable instance of it. So Switzerland was to be invited by us to ally herself with Germany by feeding us in her place! And you will notice that disclaimer of responsibility for our nourishment. We were to be invaded—I will not say in breach of what solemn promise on the invader's own part—we were to be massacred, our towns were to be burnt, our property was to be exported *en masse* into Germany, our money was to be taken from us, our food was to be seized for the German Army, yet no responsibility for us was to attach to Germany. Let Switzerland, the generous, the convenient, step in to save the situation and keep the breath in those bodies which Germany already destined for her factories. Bah! Bah! It is to be sick to think of such things. Truly the hardest thing to stomach about these people is their cant. For it is not even dexterous cant. Ah! this gives me a bad taste in the mouth. Let us pass on.

"The posters and notices and proclamations were daily multiplied.

"I suppose it was with some idea of reconciling us to their domination, by causing us to believe that it could never be shaken off, that our masters quickly began to set up bulletins of war news in

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our streets. Not one but announced a German or an Austrian victory. Had we believed, we must have lost heart ; but we believed nothing. It was a settled policy with us. We saw through the trick at once, and the report of a German success had only to be posted up for us to discredit it and to tell ourselves that things were going badly for them. And of course the real news leaked through somehow, for all their precautions. News like that of the Marne is carried by the wind, by the birds, by the thoughts of men. It cannot be kept out. We knew, we knew that they had been turned ; turned, dear God, almost before the ink was dry upon their posters that announced the rout of France and the partial investment of Paris. But there is something, Monsieur, almost admirable in the hardihood of people who can behave in such a way. Think of it. Their whole plan in ruins ; the quick victory on which they had absolutely counted for success lost ; themselves condemned to a stalemate at the best and a war of years to a certainty. And yet they could announce to us that their enemies were being chased before them to the sea. With their own people such conduct was intelligible. Their own people, being convinced of the irresistible might of Germany, would swallow any tale. But to expect us, *us*, to believe ! It was lunacy. Yet the posters followed one another regularly, and always the Germans were winning and always France and England and Russia were fleeing in disorder. And we had only to glance at their Colonel's face to read

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there what we wanted to know. As for the common soldiers, they were, I suppose, the only people in Saint Hilaire upon whom those notices produced any impression at all.

"There was another curious placard. It seems that they credited us with a desire to leave Saint Hilaire, and that they feared lest their threats of shooting might not prove a sufficient deterrent. Already, no doubt, they foresaw the moment when every able-bodied Belgian would have a value in their eyes other than as a mark for rifle practice ; I mean, the thought of the slavery to come was even then in their minds. At any rate, to discourage us from escaping into France—though how we could have done so I leave you to imagine, if you please—they set up a notice which informed us that the cholera was raging on the other side of the battle lines. Yet there was no cholera there whatever. It was just a lie. But if it should serve its purpose it was justified, one supposes, in their sight. Or would they think it necessary to justify such a small thing as a lie ? For, after all, what are truth and falsehood and such things to a people who have invented a morality for themselves ; whose only touchstone is whether any given thing does or does not serve the immediate purposes of Germany ?

"Of course we were all numbered and ticketed and registered and pigeon-holed and docketed and viséd and put on the file till we hardly knew whether we were human beings or abstract numerals or pieces of paper. To carry papers of identification is not

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to us what it would be to you in England, for the Continental peoples are accustomed to that sort of thing ; but now we had to go through a performance with the police or the military every time, almost, we crossed the street ! If any of us had occasion to take the train (I speak of days subsequent to the gay times when the sentries were given *carte blanche* to slaughter anyone who should be seen leaving the town) he had to obtain permission and identify himself all over again and have his name and age and address put on his railway ticket. Our very dogs were registered and shot if they were not known to the authorities, while the owners of such evil dogs were exorbitantly fined. To possess carrier pigeons was an offence punishable by death. We might not go near a railway line except at certain places. Farmers might not go about in their fields and woods except as the authorities judged it suitable for them to do. To light a fire out of doors, to carry a lighted lantern at night, to approach an electric installation, to do this, that, and the other were alike forbidden. You and I, my friend, have jested together in other days about that famous German word *verboten*. At Saint Hilaire we learned to understand how little humour it really contains.

“ And, should these people ever realise their ambition, the whole world will learn it too. It is, believe me, a word of infinite seriousness, and its scope is quite without bounds. It is everywhere, like the air one breathes, and it poisons that air

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"But I am not going to weary you with a full recital of our woes. To do that would take me a month. I have at least shown you something of what it is to live under German martial law.

"And now I must be making my way to my sister's good and hospitable home, for she keeps early hours, the dear woman. Her man is English, as you know. A domesticated being. He has not the café habit, and my sister and the little ones fear for the old man if he is out late in this great London. And they must not be made anxious. Another day I will tell you of the deportation business, that foulest of all the foul crimes that Germany has committed in this war. You shall hear how they carried off men, women and boys, yes, and young girls, to replace the German labour which was needed in their armies, and which lacked to their munition works. You shall hear of the brutal scenes that took place everywhere in Germany, the heartrending separations, the crowding of human beings into open cattle trucks, women throwing themselves across the railway line to stop the trains, men, who refused to go, bayoneted in cold blood. You shall hear how they tried to starve our people into submission, offering them food and money to make shells to kill their own brothers and sons and fathers. You shall hear of the girls they carried off for purposes which I will not name. But not now.

"Let me only, before I go, tell you how it came about that I am to-day sitting by your side in this

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cheerful restaurant and drinking the wine of Champagne—alas ! poor country !—at your expense.

“ It is soon told. I was among the deported. I, Aristide Gustave Segotin, sixty-two years of age, was appointed to perform labour behind the firing line. For contumacy, yes. No matter what I did ; it was connected with the deportations. There are some things, Monsieur, which flesh and blood cannot endure, and I behaved contumaciously. A year earlier I would have been shot out of hand for my pains ; but latterly they have been a little sparing of both their bullets and their beasts (I mean us, the Belgian people). And so I was condemned myself to share in the deportations ; and since I was a strong old fellow and highly contumacious, where better could I be sent than to the battle lines, to dig trenches and carry sandbags and do anything else wherein a reasonably active old man could be serviceable ?

“ Believe me, my friend, it was a pleasant change. I was much more of a slave than at Saint Hilaire, but I had no longer before my eyes the spectacle of my native streets either silent under the menace of brightly-coloured proclamations or echoing to the screams of girls. And here, behind Bapaume, it was always possible that a British shell might find me out and do my business. Yes, I welcomed my change of scene.

“ I think you can see for yourself what happened. Yes, when the Germans went back, I stayed behind. It was not difficult. They were so busy clearing

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out themselves and laying the country in ruins behind them that they for once became a little careless about one old Belgian labourer. They blew up every house they could, they cut down every tree, they poisoned every well with horse dung and other beastliness - you know what they did as well as I, though I saw it and you have only read. And the method of it all! Every soldier had his orders. Such and such trees to be cut down, such and such houses to be destroyed, such and such wells to be rendered useless. And they had a perfect little time-table for each day of destruction. On such a day such wells to be poisoned, next day so many more, until on the day appointed for departure but one well remained with pure water in it. This the last soldiers to leave were to ruin. Oh yes! it was methodical, that business. But at last it was done and I, from my hole in the ground, saw them go away Eastwards.

"Hell, no doubt, is something like that little town of Bancourt by Bapaume when the Germans left it; but I am not going to be descriptive. That I can leave with confidence to the journalists. It is enough that the British soldiers did at last come peering through the smoke and the stink, coughing and sneezing and cursing because there were no Germans for them.

"And so it was over, and I could once again go about my affairs without the permission of the German military authorities. A satisfactory condition of things for me, my good Monsieur. It was not long

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I promise you, before I had my two little ones clinging about my neck. But let us avoid the sentimental as we have avoided the sensational."

So saying, M. Segotin rose, handed me a card with his address upon it, pressed both my hands warmly, raised his hat and sauntered away from me down the brightly-lit hall, humming a brave little air.

At the door he turned to wave a hand to me and smile adieu.

And again I saw his eyes.

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